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OP-ED COLUMNIST

A Quick Fix for the Gas Addicts

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Is there a company more dangerous to America's future than General Motors? Surely, the sooner this company gets taken over by Toyota, the better off our country will be.

Why? Like a crack dealer looking to keep his addicts on a tight leash, G.M. announced its "fuel price protection program" on May 23. If you live in Florida or California and buy certain G.M. vehicles by July 5, the company will guarantee you gasoline at a cap price of \$1.99 a gallon for one year — with no limit on mileage. Guzzle away.

As The Associated Press explained the program, each month for one year, G.M. will give customers who buy these cars "a credit on a prepaid card based on their estimated fuel usage. Fuel usage will be calculated by the miles they drive, as recorded by OnStar, and the vehicle's fuel economy rating. G.M. will credit drivers the difference between the average price per gallon in their state and the \$1.99 cap." Consumers won't get any credits if gas prices fall below \$1.99.

"This program gives consumers an opportunity to experience the highly fuel-efficient vehicles G.M. has to offer in the mid-size segment," Dave Borchelt, G.M.'s Southeast general manager, said in the company's official statement. Oh, really?

Eligible vehicles in California include the 2006 and 2007 Chevrolet Tahoe and Suburban (half-ton models only), Impala and Monte Carlo sedans, G.M.C. Yukon and Yukon XL S.U.V.'s (half-ton models only), Hummer H2 and H3 S.U.V.'s, the Cadillac SRX S.U.V., and the Pontiac Grand Prix and Buick Lucerne sedans. Eligible vehicles in Florida include the 2006 and 2007 Chevrolet Impala and Monte Carlo, Pontiac Grand Prix and Buick LaCrosse.

Let's see, the 6,400-pound Hummer H2 averages around nine miles per gallon. It really is great that G.M. is giving more Americans the opportunity to experience nine-miles-per-gallon driving. And the hulking Chevy Suburban gets around 15 miles per gallon. It will be wonderful if more Americans can experience that too — with G.M.-subsidized gas.

Our military is in a war on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan with an enemy who is fueled by our gasoline purchases. So we are financing both sides in the war on terror. And what are we doing about that? Not only is GM subsidizing its gas-guzzlers, but not a single member of Congress, liberal or conservative, will stand up and demand what most of them know: that we must have some kind of gasoline tax to compel Americans to buy more fuel-efficient vehicles and to compel Detroit to make them.

Where are the presidential aspirants on this issue? I have yet to hear John McCain, Mitt Romney, George Allen, Al Gore or Hillary Clinton support at least a \$3.50 floor price for gasoline, so that it will never fall below that level and the alternatives can really flower and spread.

But if you go to G.M.'s Web site, here's what you will see: an ad with a young African-American boy saluting an American flag, above the following offer for U.S. military personnel: "In appreciation of your commitment to our country, G.M. extends a \$500 exclusive offer to active duty military and reserves when you purchase or lease select 2005, 2006 or 2007 G.M. cars, trucks and S.U.V.'s — just show your military ID!"

That's really touching. First G.M. offers a gasoline subsidy so more Americans can get hooked on nine-mile-per-gallon Hummers, and then it offers a discount to the soldiers who have to protect the oil lines to keep G.M.'s gas guzzlers guzzling. Here's a rule of thumb: The more Hummers we have on the road in America, the more military Humvees we will need in the Middle East.

You want to do something patriotic, G.M., Ford and Daimler-Chrysler? Why don't you stop using your diminishing pools of cash to buy votes so Congress will never impose improved mileage standards? That kind of strategy is why Toyota today is worth \$198.9 billion and G.M. \$15.8 billion. G.M. is worth just slightly more than Harley-Davidson, the motorcycle company (\$13.6 billion).

President Bush remarked the other day how agonizingly tough it is for a president to send young Americans to war. Yet, he's ready to do that, but he's not ready to look Detroit or Congress in the eye and demand that we put in place the fuel-efficiency legislation that will weaken the forces of theocracy and autocracy that are killing our soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan — because it might cost Republicans votes or campaign contributions.

This whole thing is a travesty. We can't keep asking young Americans to make the ultimate sacrifice in Iraq and Afghanistan if we as a society are not ready to make even the most minimal sacrifice to help them.

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